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ABSTRACT

One of the most successful examples of lifelong learning is the "study circles" program in Sweden, which attracts an estimated 50 percent of the population during their lifetimes. In vogue for more than 100 years, the study circle concept is firmly entrenched in Sweden and serves as a means of adult education. Study circles are encouraged by government support as a means of promoting democracy in the country through talking together about issues. Study circles utilize the experiences of ordinary people as a starting point for exploring socially relevant concepts. Each circle consists of 5-10 people plus a trained facilitator (not teacher). Circles usually work through a study guide during at least 7 sessions of about 20 hours each. Study circles promote literacy education, since talking is recognized as a component of literacy. Australia could benefit from the use of study circles in adult education, and efforts are being made to promote their use. Guides and packets for study circles are being developed in Australia and study circles are being encouraged as a vehicle for adult literacy education. Of particular interest is the International Study Circles Project (http://www.tsl.fi/ifwea/isc/). (Contains 13 references.) (KC)

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Learning Circles-- Democratic Pools of Knowledge

Liz Suda

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aris RESOURCES BULLETIN

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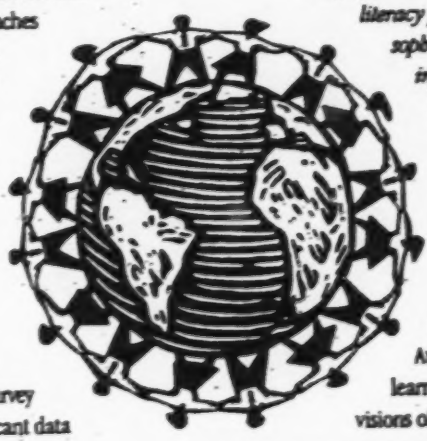
Learning Circles – democratic pools of knowledge

*By **Liz Suda**, co-ordinator of the Victorian Centre of the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium (ALNARC)*

In 2000, the Victorian Centre of the Adult Literacy and Numeracy Australian Research Consortium (ALNARC) conducted a review of international trends in adult literacy policy and pedagogy, with the view to identifying innovative approaches that might be applicable in the Australian context. The review includes case studies of four countries: Spain, United Kingdom (UK), the United States of America (USA) and Sweden. These case studies were contextualized within the global call for lifelong learning (Delors 1996) and the findings of the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS), which provided significant data on the literacy levels of the major OECD countries.



A recent paper from the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA 1999)) argues that a policy on lifelong learning is a matter of some urgency for Australia and that Australians need to develop a 'passion' for learning. The difficulty for many countries, particularly the US, UK and Australia is that many adults may have had very negative experiences of schooling and are unwilling to subject themselves to further 'humiliation'.

A 'passion' for learning implies engagement in an activity, which is enjoyable, pleasurable and rewarding. Developing the cultural conditions that might lead to a passion for learning, is a challenging prospect given current levels of participation in further education (ANTA 1999). The global call for lifelong learning is therefore an idealist vision that is not necessarily in practice supported by the majority of the population. Furthermore, visions of a 'knowledge nation' cannot be realized *when 50% of the population do not possess the requisite literacy practices to engage with the sophisticated texts of the information age* (OECD 2000), let alone the opportunities to begin the process of such a transformation. The UK's attempt to create a Learning Age (Blair 1996) in the UK reflects these realities very clearly, and Australia must heed the lessons learned there, if it is to realize visions of a *knowledge nation*.

In Australia we must ask and answer the questions: What kind of policies do we need to address the issue of lifelong learning for a knowledge society? What kind of pedagogies do we need to drive a cultural shift in perceptions of education? What are the most effective strategies for changing pre-existing paradigms of learning? Such questions presume a deeper understanding of the whole person's needs as a functioning member of society, as a parent, a worker, a member of the community and as a person who already has an educational history. A multiplicity of approaches is required.

The adult education field in Australia has long recognized the barriers facing adults in returning to study. Much adult learning theory emphasises the need to recognize the skills, knowledge and cultural experience that adult learners bring to the classroom. Adult literacy practitioners now recognize that

INSIDE

Life Online from the writers' desks 5
Moving On 7
Projects 17

reviews

Immigration Kit 8
Museums and Adults Learning 9
Learner Autonomy 12
Adapting the CGEA for young students 13
'Life Online 14
Equipped for the future 15

resources

ALNARC research reports 7
New resources 21
Journal readings 27

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developing literacy is a social practice that cannot be separated from the more functional aspects of learning to read, such as decoding, making meaning and so forth. The Certificates of General Education for Adults (CGEA), for example, provide a framework for a broad general education for adults. The framework acknowledges that literacy practices occur in many different contexts and for many different purposes. Much work has been done in this country to try and make the adult learning experience a positive one, to engage adults in meaningful learning.

So what can we learn from other countries, and are their examples of innovative pedagogies that might contribute to developing a culture of learning in Australia? The report *Policies and Pedagogies for Lifelong Literacy: International perspectives for the 21st Century* (Suda 2001,) explores these issues in some depth and makes recommendations about how global trends can be integrated into a reform agenda for Australia.

This article will focus on the findings of the case study on the Swedish adult education system, and in particular on learning circles which have attracted considerable interest here in Australia. The learning circles utilise the process of democratic dialogue to foster active engagement in informal learning. Whilst not widely promoted as an avenue to literacy, I will argue that they provide a powerful forum for the development of literacy skills in the broadest sense.

Dialogic approaches have underpinned much literacy practice both here in Australia and abroad (Freire1987). Definitions of literacy now incorporate speaking and listening, reading and writing, and critical thinking. Talking is increasingly perceived as an essential part of the process of learning to learn. It is the means by which the learner can reason and think, ask questions and refine concepts in order to absorb new knowledge and skills. What teachers once thought was the social part of teaching adults is increasingly recognized as an essential part of adult learning. Spoken language provides the underpinning knowledge about language essential for the process of learning to read written texts. That is, it is easier to learn to read and write if one has a good grasp of the language in spoken terms as this knowledge facilitates the decoding and meaning making process of reading. The learning circle provides an example of a pedagogy that requires adults to talk rather than write, in response to written texts, as a tool for exploring ideas and developing a shared approach to learning. It is a means by which the experience, views, values and opinions of the adult learner can be utilised to both enrich the learning experience and foster democratic participation in community life.

SWEDEN – DEMOCRATIC LEARNING

There is a long tradition of adult education in the Nordic countries and an established practice of lifelong learning. Sweden's late Prime Minister, Olof Palme, often called Sweden *a study circle democracy* which reflects the policy context of adult education programs. This commitment to adult education has resulted in significant levels of participation. Rubenson (1993) maintains that somewhere between 40 and 50 percent of the adult population participate in some form of adult education.

This is not surprising given that government policy on adult education in Sweden has historically recognised the importance of popular education in the development of a love of learning. The practice of Democracy is central to government policy. Popular education is regarded as essential to a healthy democracy because it:

- stimulates democracy, equality, and international solidarity and understanding;
- starts from the individuals own voluntary search for knowledge;
- is characterised by democratic values and cooperation;
- aims to strengthen individuals ability to influence their own life, and to be able, together with others, to change society in accordance with their values and ideals;
- helps provide all, but particularly the educationally disadvantaged, with good basic knowledge, and helps stimulate further search for knowledge.

(Government Bill quoted in Rubenson 1993: 54)

The practice of democracy therefore provides the ideological focus for adult education in Sweden (Larssen 2000) This may explain why Sweden is considered to be progressive and liberal in it's educational practices, as is the Australian education system. Adult learning principles are very similar in Sweden to here in Australia (Christie 1993). Jan Hagston, writing about a recent trip to Sweden, was struck by parallels in practice when she visited an adult education classroom, (Hagston 2000). Swedish practice is therefore of considerable interest to Australia.

The basic structure of adult education in Sweden remains the same despite a move to more vocationally oriented and competency based training programs in recent years. There are two major organisations that are involved in providing adult education in Sweden. One is the study associations which organize the learning circles (called study circles in Sweden) and the other the Folk High Schools which are run to a large extent by popular movements and non-government organisations. Folk High Schools are managed by local authorities and county councils. There is no standard curriculum, and each school makes its own decisions regarding teaching plans. The traditional freedom of the Folk High School has led to ample experimentation and innovation. Problem oriented and thematic studies for longer or shorter periods are quite common. The learning circles provide a less structured form of education and a possible pathway into the Folk High School for those who want more intensive study (Christie 1998).

The Swedish term 'Folkbildning' encompasses the notion that education and knowledge for all, helps the society as a whole. This concept underpins the adult education sector in Sweden. There are now over 200,000 individual study circles in Sweden with approximately 1.5 million Swedes attending. This represents nearly a quarter of the adult population in Sweden. The Swedish

Government spends A$500 million on this non-formal adult education, which reflects the importance of this movement to the government's priorities (Larssen 2000).

HOW STUDY CIRCLES WORK

The basic concept of the study circle is that it utilises the experiences of ordinary people as a starting point for exploring socially relevant concepts. The circles operate on a process of dialogue, which is democratic and participatory. The circle has a facilitator who is trained, but who is not a teacher and is not there to impart knowledge in a traditional sense. The group, consisting of five to ten people, is provided with a study guide, reading material, slides, videos and other resources and a series of structured questions to work through. These materials are often written by a team of curriculum developers but can arise organically from within a specific organisation. The facilitator is there as an equal participant rather than as a teacher and the keeper of knowledge (Larssen 2000).

Through a process of collaborative dialogue the group is able to work through the study guide at their own pace and determine the way the group will proceed. Reflection, discussion and action are the primary focus of these discussions. This therefore involves people in an equal partnership in negotiating the direction the group will take and enables individual interests to shape the study session, which is usually about twenty hours long with at least seven meetings. All members take an equal share of responsibility for ensuring that the studies are meaningful, however there are three specific roles participants may assume: coordinator, leader or member. The coordinator selects the reading material and organises the meetings. The leader (sometimes also the coordinator) leads the discussion and acts to maintain the focus and encourage equal and active participation.

The study guides are very important because they provide participants with a direction, and input of knowledge beyond their experience. Although study guides vary from situation to situation there are some commonalties in their approach. They are on the whole, brief and easy to read with topics divided into sections to accommodate the length of a session (Brophy 1999). The study circle is therefore a relatively structured process but the participants learn in an informal manner about issues that are applicable to everyday life.

The study circle is based on the premise that people have an innate desire to learn, so that the experience of improving one's knowledge and ability to understand and interact with the world is sufficient reward in itself (Brevskilan 1980 in Brophy 1999). Consequently, government funding for study circles is granted on the condition that it does not lead to a qualification. Study circles are also often overtly political, dealing with controversial issues, such as the use of nuclear power in Sweden, but are nevertheless actively supported by the social democratic government.

HOW SUCCESSFUL ARE THEY?

Study circles have been operating in Sweden for over a 100 years and are therefore embedded in the educational culture of the country. Because they have not been concerned with qualifications as such, evaluations have sought to improve the practice rather than measure educational attainment. It is widely accepted that they do contribute to a range of learning skills but their ostensible intention in the Swedish context is to foster participation and social solidarity.

Swedish research has ascertained that some circles deviate from the espoused ideals because members can become passive or the leader may not fulfil their function correctly (Brophy 1999). The drop out rate is a factor and not all groups are able to reach a common agenda. Because the study groups are based on non-traditional methods of education, group dynamics play an important role in their success. If the group does not reach a mutually agreeable method of operating the whole experience can in fact be counter productive. Successful study circles therefore require a commitment and belief in the philosophy underpinning the practice, that is, a collaborative, democratic, participatory and inclusive process.

STUDY CIRCLES IN US AND AUSTRALIA

There have been a number of study circle initiatives throughout the US integrating the family literacy /parenting associations and the Trade Union movement. Of particular interest is the International Study Circles Project (http://www.tsl.fi/isc/edu1.html)

Here in Australia the study circle has attracted sporadic interest dating back to the 1980's but has never been embraced in a comprehensive manner. There has been interest of late in the Swedish model of adult education and, after visiting Sweden in 1990, Peak observed that

the study circle has been the most successful means of providing non-formal adult education in a developed society

(Peak 1990 cited in Brophy 1999).

Adult Learning Australia (ALA) has registered the name 'Learning Circles Australia' and has initiated several publications to foster the use of the study circle in Australia. A number of kits have been produced focusing on landcare issues and another on Aboriginal reconciliation. The Reconciliation Kit has been trialed extensively and is currently being promoted within the community sector of Victoria. It is a very comprehensive kit that contains an abundance of resource materials and issues for discussion.

Australian research on study circles is not as prolific as efforts in the US, but preliminary findings suggest that study circles have been seen as a worthwhile experience by the majority of participants (Shires and Crawford 1999).

One criticism of the Reconciliation Kit is that the bulk of material is overwhelming and could be streamlined. The kit does however attempt to identify the full range of issues related to the

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reconciliation process. The Shires and Crawford (1999) report recommended that study circles be taken up as a professional development tool for service sector workers (particularly in health, employment, and training and social services). ALA has continued to promote the methodology of study circles in adult education contexts and has entered into the area of civics education.

Study circles in Australia have tended to attract people with an aptitude and interest in learning - about 85% come from professional or middle class backgrounds (Shires interview, 2000), so literacy has not really featured as an issue. However, the Law and Order Kit were used effectively with ex-offenders and sole parents, although a thorough evaluation has not been conducted and literacy and numeracy skills have not been assessed. Nevertheless, a cursory analysis of the reading materials and the questions asked suggests a reading level of at least NRS level 3, so the kits assume a functional level of literacy.

Brophy (1999) has explored the use of learning circles as a means of empowering unemployed people. His research lends weight to the argument that learning circles have the potential to foster participatory democracy. It is also highly probable that they could foster the development of literacy skills through active engagement with ideas and developing new knowledge. Active engagement is clearly a powerful variable in achieving successful learning.

LEARNING CIRCLES AND LITERACY

We know that the process of achieving literacy for most adults is a deeply personal experience, as well as an act of solidarity with other learners; one which is closely connected to one's position in the society, one's educational experience, work experience and engagement in the political process. Whilst there is a lack of research, which proves that learning circles can contribute to literacy, it will be obvious from the information presented here that learning circles provide a context in which adult literacy learners can participate and develop a passion for learning. Such engagement will invariably contribute to the development of literacy. Dialogue is the process through which the learner makes meaning of the text and the ideas behind the text. Learning Circles offer participants the opportunity to construct their own readings and interpretations, their own theories on issues of community concern. They provide a non-threatening, informal pathway to further learning and have the potential to not only foster a more democratic society but also a culture that values learning.

Learning Circles clearly provide a pedagogical model, which could easily be integrated into current adult education practices, however there are many challenges in turning that potential into a reality. The rhetoric of lifelong learning may be inspiring to those who already engage in further education, but the challenge is to find a means of inspiring those, who might not ordinarily do so, to participate. To rewrite an old cliché: If we could get the horses to come to the water they would most certainly enjoy the drink.

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ALNARC research projects to be conducted in Victoria include how adult literacy teachers accommodate the needs of ESL learners in mixed native and non-native classes, and a project on effective practice in literacy programs for youth.